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PAINT (SOMEONE) A PICTURE

to explain something in very great detail

1. Mary is one of those people to whom you have to explain everything in great detail. You always have to *paint her a picture*.
2. I've explained as much as I should have to. Do I have to *paint you a picture*?

The expression conveys the idea that the explanation is as good and as thorough as if one had painted a picture.

PANDORA'S BOX

a situation that contains many unexpected and unwanted problems and consequences

1. Be careful. If you try to find out more than you should about her past, you might be opening *Pandora's box*.
2. Larry thought the sale of his mother's house was a *Pandora's box*. There were too many people to please and too many people who might be offended.

Synonym: *can of worms, open a*

The expression originates from the Greek mythological character Pandora, who was given a box containing all the evils that could befall mankind. She opened it, unleashing all mankind's ills.

PAR FOR THE COURSE

usual or to be expected; typical

1. Robert is late as usual. It's *par for the course*.
2. I asked for five different kinds of sandwiches at the cafeteria, and they didn't have any of them. But that's *par for the course*; they never have half the items listed on the menu.

Compare to: *rule of thumb*

The expression originates from the game of golf, in which *par* is the expected or usual number of strokes a player should take to get the ball from the tee into the hole on that particular course. The expression is usually used in a negative context, i.e. one couldn't expect anything better.

PASS THE BUCK

to redirect the blame or responsibility for something (usually a decision) to someone else

1. Sharon suggested we go to see a movie, which turned out to be awful. Then she tried to *pass the buck* and pretend that it hadn't been her choice.
2. Carol never tries to *pass the buck*. She is always willing to make hard decisions and stand behind them, even if they aren't always the best ones.

In poker games during the 1800s, a shotgun pellet (called buck) or a pocketknife (often made from buckhorn) was passed to the next person responsible for dealing the cards. By the 20th century, *pass the buck* came to mean shifting responsibility to someone else. In 1949, U.S. President Harry Truman placed a sign on his desk that read 'the buck stops here,' meaning that he took responsibility for government actions and would not try to place the responsibility on anybody else.

PAST (ONE'S) PRIME

too old to be of much value

1. As an athlete, he's *past his prime*. He just can't run as fast as he could five years ago.
2. Nancy isn't *past her prime* yet. She still has a lot of energy.

Synonym: *over the hill*

PATIENCE OF JOB

unlimited patience; the willingness to endure hardship patiently

1. Your twins are so mischievous, but you never lose your temper. You have the *patience of Job*.
2. That teacher must have the *patience of Job*—he answers all of the students' questions and waits for them to be quiet before he continues.

The word *Job* is a name (it rhymes with *robe*). The expression originates from the Biblical story of Job, a man who was able to keep his faith despite the hardships God inflicted on him during a contest with the devil.

PAY (SOMEONE) BACK

to respond to somebody's behavior with similar behavior

1. Desmond was rude to you on the playground, but you can be nice to him anyway. You don't have to *pay him back* by insulting him.
2. Shelly appreciated Tim's kind words, and tried to *pay him back* by encouraging him the next time they met.

The expression is often, but not always, used in reference to negative situations.

PAY THE PIPER

to pay for one's mistakes; to live with the consequences of one's (wrong) actions

1. Catherine thought she could play her way through school, and now she has to stay after class to make up her failed grades. She should have known she would have to *pay the piper*.
2. I cheated people out of their money. I got caught, and now I'm in prison, *paying the piper* for what I did.

A piper is a musician who plays on a pipe.

PAY THROUGH THE NOSE

to pay a great amount; to pay too much

1. Carissa wanted tickets to the concert so badly that she was willing to pay double for them. She *paid through the nose*, but she made it to the concert.
2. Peter's parents said he couldn't go out until he finished his chores, so Peter promised to do his sister's chores for a whole week if she would do his for a day. He had to *pay through the nose*, but it was worth it to him.

Compare to: *cost (someone) a mint*; *cost (someone) an arm and a leg*

The expression usually refers to paying money (sentence 1), but it can also refer to exacting other kinds of payment such as trading work, making someone feel very guilty, etc.

PENCIL/PAPER PUSHER

an office worker; a bureaucrat who routinely does his or her paperwork job without any desire to advance

1. Charlene wanted to get ahead in her job. Although she was a clerk now, she had no intention of being a *pencil pusher* all her life.
2. Most of the employees here are just *paper pushers*. They sit behind their desks, do their jobs, and they don't expect to be anywhere else in ten years.

The expression is derogatory. It is often used to describe someone who ought to be more ambitious.

PENNY PINCHER

a person that doesn't like to spend money

1. My mother won't spend money on new clothes until her old ones are nearly falling apart. She's a *penny pincher*.
2. When Joe decided to save money for a house, he became a *penny pincher*—he stopped eating at restaurants, went to the library instead of buying books, and walked to work instead of taking the train.

PETER OUT

to disappear gradually

1. We followed the river upstream as it got smaller and smaller until it finally *petered out*.

2. The members of the club got together every week until they began to lose interest. At first, just a few people stopped coming, but eventually they all *petered out*.

The expression does not mean to disappear gradually as in fade, but to disappear slowly in terms of quantity or size.

PICK (SOMEONE'S) BRAIN

to get information from someone, usually by questioning the person carefully and in great detail

1. I was exhausted after spending hours with the investigators while they *picked my brain*. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to give them any useful information.
2. You know a lot about the latest in jet engine design, don't you? We want to *pick your brain* about the new design before we start to build our engine.

The expression suggests that a person's brain contains bits of information that can be "picked" like fruit from a tree or like meat off of a bone.

PIE IN THE SKY

something that is unrealistic or that cannot be achieved

1. Don't believe those *pie-in-the-sky* advertisements you see on television selling large plots of land for pennies. They're too good to be true.
2. The salesman promised Amy that the wrinkle cream would make her skin as soft as a baby's, but she knew not to believe him. It was *pie in the sky*.

PIECE OF CAKE, A

something that is easy to do

1. When the children accidentally threw the ball on top of the roof, the gym teacher asked me to climb up and get it down. I told her it would be easy for me. It was a *piece of cake*.
2. When Roger studied Spanish, it was a *piece of cake*, but he found that learning Japanese was very hard.

PINCH PENNIES

to be very careful with one's money; to be concerned about how one spends every penny

1. Joe shops at discount supermarkets and watches for items on sale. He's a real *penny pincher*.
2. They waste gasoline driving an extra ten miles to a store that has something on sale so they can save a dollar. They squander dollars to *pinch pennies*.

The expression is slightly disparaging. A penny is a coin worth one cent in the U.S. This is the smallest denomination in the American monetary system.

PINK SLIP

notice that one has been fired from one's job

1. Yesterday the company fired a dozen people. They all got *pink slips* in their pay packets.
2. Gordon came home early from work looking worried. He had just gotten a *pink slip*, and now he would have to find another job.

The expression probably originates from the color of the form used to notify people that they had been fired. Such forms often came in multiple carbon copies. Each copy was a different color and was designated for a different recipient, e.g., the pay office got one particular color, while the fired person always got the pink copy.

PLAY HARDBALL

to work or act aggressively, competitively, or ruthlessly, as in business or politics

1. You have to be willing to *play hardball* in the business world today. If you aren't aggressive, you'll be taken over by the competition.
2. Mr. Norton had been mayor of a small town for many years, but when he decided to run for Congress his friends told him he would have to be prepared to *play hardball*. National politics can be much more aggressive than local politics.

The expression originates from the game of baseball, which uses a hard ball, as opposed to the similar game of softball.

PLAY IT BY EAR

to go along with a situation as it develops before deciding what to do; to do something without prior planning

1. Let's get in the car and go for a drive. We don't have to decide before we start where we're going; let's just *play it by ear*.
2. I'm going to watch to see how the situation develops and decide what to do as I go along. I want to *play it by ear* and see what happens.

Compare to: *wing it*; *by the seat of (one's) pants*

The expression probably originates from the idea of playing a piece of music by ear, i.e., not reading the music as one plays but simply listening to the piece, picking out the notes by ear and then playing it.

PLAY (ONE'S) CARDS RIGHT

to do all the right things and make all the right moves in order to achieve some end

1. I can't promise anything, but if you listen carefully and *play your cards right*, I might be able to include you in this deal.
2. The bank guard caught the thief with the money. The thief told the guard that if he *played his cards right* and let the thief go free, he could get half the money.

The expression often suggests something slightly conspiratorial and dishonest. It probably originates from a card game like bridge, in which the players have any number of ways to play their cards, but playing them in just the right way will result in winning.

PLAY SECOND FIDDLE

to be in a subordinate position; to have a lower rank or standing than someone else

1. Jim wasn't very happy when he was made assistant manager while Frank was promoted to manager. Jim didn't want to *play second fiddle* to Frank.
2. Both Ron and Sam liked Julie, but Julie preferred Sam. Ron *played second fiddle* to Sam.

The expression probably originates from the fact that in an orchestra the first violin, or "fiddle," gets most of the attention and plays the leading part, while the second fiddle is less noticed.

PLAY WITH FIRE

to invite disaster by doing something foolish, dangerous, or risky

1. Don't get involved with people who use drugs. Don't *play with fire*.
2. How can Becky go out with that man? He has such a bad reputation. Doesn't she know she's *playing with fire*?

POKER FACE

an expressionless face; a face that reveals nothing of one's feelings or thoughts

1. Kay isn't very good at hiding her feelings. She just doesn't have a *poker face*.
2. The businessman kept a *poker face* while he carried out the negotiations. He didn't want to let anyone know how pleased he was with the deal.

The expression originates from the game of poker, in which the players avoid showing any pleasure or displeasure in the cards they have been dealt by keeping an expressionless face.

POP THE QUESTION

to ask someone to get married

1. Jane was hoping Mike would *pop the question* before long. After all, they had been dating each other for more than two years and Jane thought it was time they got married.
2. It came as a complete surprise to Marsha when Bill *popped the question* and asked her to marry him.

The question in the expression is "Will you marry me?" Presumably it is popped because it is supposed to come as a surprise.

POUND OF FLESH

a (figuratively) painful payment of a debt

1. When we fell behind in our mortgage and asked the bank to work out a different payment schedule, they refused and took possession of our house. They got their *pound of flesh*.
2. You've been annoying me for days about the ten dollars I owe you, but I'm afraid I don't have the money right now. You'll have to wait for your *pound of flesh*.

The expression originates from Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* in which Antonio borrows money from Shylock, a Jewish money lender, promising to pay it back when his ships arrive. When Antonio learns that his ships have sunk at sea, Shylock demands payment in the form of one pound of Antonio's flesh.

PULL (ONESELF) UP BY (ONE'S) BOOTSTRAPS

to improve oneself (usually economically) without help from others

1. Clarence didn't come from a very promising background and no one thought he would succeed. However, he *pulled himself up by his bootstraps*, got a good education, and became a prosperous lawyer.
2. Don't expect other people to help you get ahead in life. If you want to get somewhere, you'll have to *pull yourself up by your bootstraps* and do it for yourself.

PULL OUT ALL THE STOPS

to use everything possible; to spare nothing; to spare no expense

1. They decided to have the best vacation ever, so they flew first-class, took taxis everywhere, stayed in a four-star hotel, and ate at the most expensive restaurants. They *pulled out all the stops*.
2. Our only daughter is getting married. Since it's something that happens only once, we're going to *pull out all the stops*: a big wedding with flowers everywhere and a sit-down dinner for 500 people.

Compare to: *whole hog*; *whole nine yards*; *to the hilt*; *go to town*

The origin of the expression is that in playing an organ, the organist gets the maximum sound from the instrument by pulling out all the stops on the keyboard.

PULL RANK

to take advantage of one's superior position (one's rank)

1. Usually the boss lets all the workers take part in making important decisions, but this time she *pulled rank* and made the decision entirely by herself.
2. First the army officer tried to persuade his men politely to his way of thinking. When they still wouldn't see matters his way, he had to *pull rank* and give them orders.

This phrase is based on one of the meanings of the word *pull*, specifically 'to exert control.'

PULL SOMEONE'S LEG

to tease, fool, or trick someone in a friendly way

1. You can't believe what John says half the time. I'll bet he was just teasing you. He was just *pulling your leg*.
2. *Stop pulling my leg!* I want you to tell me the truth.

PULL (SOMETHING) OFF

to accomplish something that had appeared difficult to finish or achieve

1. The thieves didn't think they would succeed in stealing the jewels, but they managed to *pull it off*.
2. Do you think we can *pull the deal off*? It's going to take a lot of late nights and hard work to do it.

PULL STRINGS

to use one's influence

1. Can you get me a job in your father's company? I know you can do it if you're willing to *pull strings*.
2. Jane's parents were influential in politics, but she wanted to make her way on her own. She didn't like *pulling strings* to get what she wanted.

The expression originates from the idea of a string puppet or marionette, which can be controlled by pulling on its strings. A person who can pull strings can control a situation and influence others.

PULL THE RUG OUT FROM UNDER (SOMEONE)

to abruptly ruin someone's plans or expectations

1. When Tim went into his supervisor's office, he thought he was going to get a raise for a job well done. He had the *rug pulled out from under him* when the boss fired him instead.
2. Anne pulled the *rug out from under her parents* when she told them that she was not going to medical school and had decided to get married instead.

Compare to: *knock/throw (someone) for a loop*

The expression suggests the feeling of shock a person would have if a rug was literally pulled out from under him or her.

PULL THE WOOL OVER (SOMEONE'S) EYES

to deceive or fool someone

1. The young man was so naive that he believed whatever anyone told him. It was easy to *pull the wool over his eyes*.
2. The children told their mother they were going to school when in fact they planned to go to the movies. They managed to *pull the wool over her eyes*.

Compare to: *song and dance*; *cock-and-bull story*; *snow job*; *fall for (something)*

PULL UP STAKES

to collect one's household belongings and leave one's house or property; to move to another place

1. Life in the big cities of the east was often discouraging, so many families *pulled up stakes* and moved west to California.
2. There aren't many people left in this town. Almost everyone is *pulling up stakes* and moving someplace where they can find a job and make a better living.

This express originated during the 1700s with pioneers moving westward through the United States seeking land to settle on. To claim a portion of land for themselves, the settlers would mark the boundaries of the land with stakes (wood). If they later decided to move and give up claim to the land, they would literally pull up the stakes marking the boundaries. It is often used to describe a sense of abandonment, of leaving one's land behind because one has fallen on hard times.

PUT ALL (ONE'S) EGGS IN ONE BASKET

to invest all one's hopes or plans in only one possible outcome

1. We found a house we want to buy, but we haven't stopped looking at others because the sellers haven't agreed to our price. We don't want to *put all our eggs in one basket*.
2. Sally concentrated all her hopes on going to one particular university. Her parents told her it was a mistake to *put all her eggs in one basket*—that school might not accept her, so she should consider some alternatives.

The expression is usually used in the negative. It suggests that putting all one's eggs in one basket is unwise, because if one drops the basket, all the eggs will break. It would be better to have the eggs divided among several baskets.

PUT (ONE'S) BEST FOOT FORWARD

to try to make the best possible impression

1. Patrick wanted to make a good impression at his job interview, so he dressed carefully and *put his best foot forward*.
2. The teacher asked us to *put our best foot forward* when we met the President. It was such an honor for the school; we wanted the whole school to be proud of us.

PUT (ONE'S) FINGER ON IT

to identify or understand something properly

1. Jim knew there was a problem with the ending of his story, but he couldn't *put his finger on it*. He needed somebody else to point out the problem.
2. Ellie remembered playing the game when she was little, but when she tried to remember how to play, she couldn't *put her finger on it*.

PUT (ONE'S) FOOT DOWN

to be firm and unyielding about something

1. The children were watching more and more television. Finally, their mother *put her foot down* and told them that from then on they could only watch one hour of television a day.
2. I know how much you want a motorcycle, but I just don't think it's safe. I'm going to have to *put my foot down* on this and tell you that you can't have one.

Compare to: *lay down the law*; *draw the line (at something)*; *read (someone) the riot act*

In this phrase 'put' means to exert control. The expression is often used to describe parents setting rules for their children. The expression is often used in reference to a request, which is refused, or some form of current (bad) behavior that is forbidden.

PUT (ONE'S) MONEY WHERE (ONE'S) MOUTH IS

to support what one is saying by risking or spending money (sentences 1 and 2); to demonstrate in action what one says one can do (sentence 3)

1. The mayor was always talking about doing something good for the homeless people in our city. All we had heard so far was talk, so at the next city council meeting we asked her to *put her money where her mouth was* and actually do something constructive.
2. They talked so much about wanting to help us get a good start in life that I finally said, "Why don't you *put your money where your mouth is*?"
3. Jeffrey talks a lot about how he can drive faster than anyone else in his new sports car, but I wonder if he's willing to *put his money where his mouth is* and actually race against someone.

Compare to: *actions speak louder than words*

The expression is used to challenge someone who talks a lot about doing or being able to do something, but who never actually does anything to demonstrate it.

PUT (SOMEONE) ON THE SPOT

to put someone in a difficult situation or to present someone with a difficult choice; to embarrass someone

1. I knew John had left work to go to the bank when he wasn't supposed to, and the boss *put me on the spot* when he asked if I knew where John was. I didn't want to lie to the boss, but I didn't want to get John in trouble either.
2. Their neighbor *put them on the spot* when she asked to borrow money from them. They liked their neighbor and wanted to stay on good terms with her, but they knew that lending money to a friend frequently leads to disagreement.

Compare to: *over a barrel*

PUT THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE

to reverse the necessary or expected order of two things; to put a later step first

1. Christopher is already making plans to join a law firm next September, but he hasn't even passed the bar exam yet. Isn't he *putting the cart before the horse*?
2. You can't illustrate the book before you have written the text. That's *putting the cart before the horse*.

The expression suggests that one is reversing the natural order of things. The cart must go after the horse in order to get anywhere.

PUT THE SQUEEZE/SCREWS ON/TO

to apply pressure on someone to do something;
to force or coerce someone

1. I have two job offers and I haven't been able to decide which one to accept. They are both *putting the squeeze on me* to decide soon.
2. The senator wanted his colleagues to vote for his proposal. They owed him a favor, so he began to *put the screws on*.
3. I'd better pay Jim back soon, or I'm afraid he's going to *put the screws to me*.